[voices-from-the-pandemic-a-new-series-for-these-covid-19-times) (https://www.powerhousearena.com/events/book-launch-return-to-the-enchanted-island-by-johary-ravaloson/)

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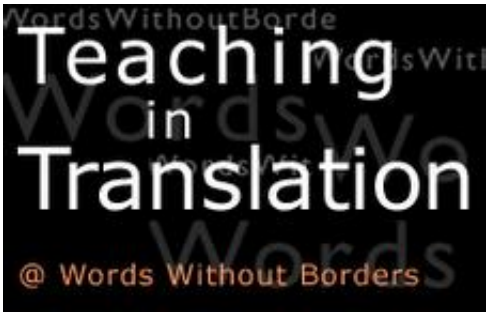
- teaching in translation (https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/archives-by-category/category/teaching-in-translation)

Translation and Proficiency Language Teaching (/dispatches/article/translation-and-proficiency-language-teaching)



In a previous post (http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/?lab=ValentinoEducationBlog1), I suggested that the covers of books make for rather poor soil in which to cultivate an appreciation for translated contemporary literature among the general English-reading public. Of course the essential work of translators should be recognized whenever possible, on covers and title pages, and in bios, prefaces, reviews, and interviews. But if highlighting the fact of a book's having been translated makes it less likely that readers will be interested in it, less likely that they will pick it up from the book store shelf and select it over the equally or lower-priced volume with similar content crammed next to it, then all that attention to translation might be doing harm rather than good. It might. In any case, surely there are better places than the retail book store for teachers to focus their attention and effort in order to raise translation awareness, understanding, recognition, and appreciation, and by extension, change reading practices and tastes.

Attributing people's discomfort about translation (that look on their faces) to their relative ignorance of foreign languages—an interpretive move many of my foreign-language colleagues tend to make—is, I believe, a mistake. People who have studied foreign languages can be ethnocentric and intolerant readers of translations, too. Indeed, a little bit of foreign-

language study can fuel some of the worst forms of translational blindness, as when, for instance, editors or authors insist on being the sole evaluators of a translation's quality when, in fact, they should be sharing that responsibility with—or leaving it altogether to—translators. Nor is it necessarily true that a mostly monolingual culture is guaranteed to be resistant to translation: the case of Japan, where translations are highly prized and widely read from childhood on, makes this clear. Accepting translated works is not quite what I have in mind. English readers can be plenty accepting, especially when the authors are dead, white, and male. But even in such cases, eyes begin to glaze over as soon as one starts to talk not about characters, plot, setting, theme, and the author's life but about the translation's characters, plot, setting, themes, and—heaven forbid—the translator's life. There immediately is that look again, evoked apparently by the inscrutable third term (translation) and the inscrutable interloper (the translator). The only aspect of the translator's work into which studying a foreign language is guaranteed to provide insight is the part that has to do with studying a foreign language. But I would like to suggest a different approach that might do much more.

The dominant foreign-language teaching methods in the U.S. over the last approximately thirty years would not be especially helpful in counteracting resistance to translation among Anglophone readers. We are approximately a generation downwind of the great sea change in foreign language pedagogy that was marked by the emergence of the communicative method and oral proficiency standards in the 1980s. That framework positioned itself by contrast to a variety of other methods, perhaps none more polemically than the one known as "grammar/translation." Indeed, grammar/translation came to be an object of especial scorn for the early proponents of the new science of second language acquisition (SLA). Those who had adhered to grammar/translation were often denigrated as unsystematic, ineffective teachers who—I have heard this critique voiced more than once—actually did not speak the languages they taught very well anyway. They were hiding their lack of fluency, so the criticism went, behind grammar rules and rote translation drills that did little but take up valuable class time. The use of translation in foreign-language teaching was equated, then, with ineffective methodology used by poor speakers.

The rather consistent bias, in proficiency models of foreign language instruction, towards fluent speaking was especially evident in this early stage, and it lingers still. What I would like to emphasize is SLA's methodological privileging not of speech per se, but of expressivity as a category of language experience, language life. The very definition of proficiency in most SLA models, which some people still like to call fluency, betrays such a bias. In the standard oral proficiency test, a speaker is provided with a situation in which she or he is unlikely to know all the specific words that might pertain to that situation. For example, you are getting a haircut and you want to tell the stylist that you would like to shorten the bangs and thin the hair at the temples. The problem is designed with the assumption that the language learners being tested most likely will not know the words for "bangs," "temples," and "to thin"; their proficiency is measured by how well they are able to maneuver around their ignorance, that is, circumlocute. The thought here presumably is that this is something native speakers do all the time, in the many situations where they do not know the exact or technical vocabulary. It constitutes a meta-speech strategy of sorts that, when combined with a variety of language rudiments, enables superior speakers to communicate in just about any situation.

This is perhaps the smartest global strategy for foreign-language teaching that has ever been devised. It is flexible and testable. When you explain it to administrators, moreover, they very quickly see its virtues, especially when one stipulates the specific skills that an "intermediate mid" language user is supposed to be able to exhibit, for instance, in an exit interview. I will only note in passing here the considerable degree to which this approach has tended to alienate from the entire enterprise of foreign language instruction those who like to emphasize literature and ideas in their teaching. This is an important matter in the current, fragmented foreign language and literature environment of post-secondary education, but it lies outside my focus.

Instead, to the essentially expressivity-based method described above, where the teaching tools emphasize the

verbalization of one's own thoughts and desires, I would like to suggest the healthy supplement of translation, where comprehension and expression in writing of *someone else's* thoughts and desires become the primary emphasis. By practicing translation, one pays especially close attention to what other people are saying and writing and, if one does not know the words, one has to find them out, not find a way around them. In translation, circumlocution is almost never an option. Nor can you skip over what you don't understand, or stop paying attention when you don't agree.

I am not advocating a return to grammar/translation in the teaching of modern foreign languages. On the contrary, rote drills are no more likely to cultivate a translational sensibility than is learning how to express one's wishes to a hair stylist. I wonder, however, if the pervasiveness of proficiency notions in foreign language education might stand in the way of a fuller engagement with language learning and language life, and this prompts me to ask the question: By marginalizing translation from the language teaching process, might we be depriving learners of an essentially empathic linguistic practice, like training musicians by focusing only on the solo? I have in mind the practice of serious literary translation rather than drills. Incorporating *translation as practice* (see my next post on this) into the teaching of language would create a hybrid method of sorts. What would students of such a method need in order to practice it proficiently?

They would have to have a solid grasp of a source language, its grammar and syntax, its sound possibilities, regionalisms, slang, and idioms—all from the period in which the source texts were written. They would need to have a thorough understanding of the genres of the works, their histories and variations, and the poetics of the periods in question, as well as closely neighboring genres—is this lampoon or parody? They would need to be able to identify literary, cultural, and historical allusions in a source text, which means they would have to have a sense of the author's range of knowledge and experience, too. Then they would need to know at least as much or more about the language tradition into which they were translating—its poetics and genres and sound possibilities and so on, in order best to engage an audience in that language. They would have to have a sense of rhetoric, of how to position themselves vis-à-vis their author; they would have to be able to write good dialogue, and differentiate one voice from another; and discriminate among words of different registers, find metaphors, sayings appropriate to language users of different ages and cultures, a twenty-year-old homeless man in a coastal resort, a sixty-year-old widow on an inland farm. And they would have to recall, in the midst of doing all this, that the words they were using were not merely an expression of what they might themselves want, or their own thoughts, at least not entirely their own.

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